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A look at education's best

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

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A look at education's best. (American Vocational Association's national award winners for 1998) *Julie Cahill.*

Abstract: The American Vocational Assn has announced the winners of its national awards for 1998. Connie Smithson of Hixson (Tennessee) High School was selected as the Vocational Teacher of the Year for her service-learning program. Meanwhile, Tabitha Ratcliffe of Hayes Technical High School was named the Outstanding New Vocational Teacher for her information engineering technology program. Lastly, Belinda McCharen, a school-to-work coordinator in Oklahoma, was chosen the Outstanding Vocational Educator.

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As always the competition was tough. But after a judging process that took months, only three names remained. Meet the American Vocational Association national award winners for 1998.

Beyond the Textbooks

What students learn in Connie Smithson's service-learning program can't be found in a textbook. Classmates of Jason Gore can attest to that.

Jason incorporated a special visual aid into his final project for Smithson's class, in which Hixson (Tennessee) High School students learn about empathy and volunteerism through community projects. After his oral presentation, he brought into the classroom his 12-year-old brother, Marcus, who was left quadriplegic after an accident when he was a year old. Jason explained his daily routine to his classmates; up at 5 a.m. every weekday to put the braces on Marcus's legs and feed him through a gastrointestinal tube.

The students then gathered in a circle on the floor around Marcus and Jason as they demonstrated the new exercises they'd been working on.

"After Jason's presentation, I overheard the other students talking to each other," Smithson recalls. "They were saying, 'Wow, we really have no excuse for being late for school since Jason makes it on time every day,' and 'I know, and this is a responsibility that he'll deal with for life.'"

"Needless to say, I didn't have to do any teaching that day," Smithson says. It's a humble response from a teacher who has created an environment in which her students feel comfortable and confident enough to reveal their emotions and personal experiences.

Smithson's service-learning curriculum puts students in touch with the Hixson community and people in need and educates them in some of the tougher lessons in life. Students devote their semester to community service work and must then find parallels between those experiences and their own lives. Smithson has recruited 65 agencies and organizations to participate, from the Chattanooga Community Kitchen to a local domestic violence shelter. Jason, for example, chose to do his service work at Orange Grove Center, a school for disabled children and adults.

Smithson, who also teaches family dynamics, nutrition and food, and interpersonal communications, is proud of her innovative family and consumer sciences curriculum. She's an advocate of vocational education in her high school, and her service-learning course is a model program in Tennessee.

"I have students making room in their schedules for my classes, instead of just selecting family and consumer sciences as an elective to fill space," she says.

And it's not just young women filling her classes.

"It is easy to draw female students into the program, but I have been pleased and surprised to see an increase in male enrollment. The boys are attracted to the hands-on approach of service learning and enjoy the many leadership opportunities that the class presents," she says.

Smithson's students are so impressed with her classes that many of them take a different one each year through graduation. Smithson says the service-learning program is one of the reasons her students keep coming back.

"The nature of the teenage beast is that they need the lure of a carrot and if you have a carrot they will come to you willingly and quickly," Smithson says. "I was looking for a carrot to dangle in front of them, and the service-learning program is it."

A former student says, "Mrs. Smithson taught me that volunteerism is understanding peoples' needs and reaching out to them, not out of sympathy, but with empathy and compassion. In this class, we were never given answers, but were asked to find them for ourselves."

A Career Meant to Be

Can a love for teaching lure someone from a successful, high-paying job? "Absolutely," says Tabitha Ratcliffe.

Since her husband accepted a new job and the couple moved last year to Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, Ratcliffe has been working as a corporate software trainer for Entre'PC Solutions, but she can't wait to get back to the high school classroom. She knows first hand that the grass isn't always greener on the corporate side.

Ratcliffe received the award for Outstanding New Vocational Teacher for her work at Hayes Technical High School in Grove City, Ohio. Her information engineering technology, program used a team approach to business applications, CADD, graphics, integrated English and multimedia technology.

Ratcliffe remembers wanting to be a teacher when she was in grade school. But when she got to high school another career path caught her attention - accounting. She changed her career plan and dove into a math-heavy curriculum with plans to major in accounting in college and then become a CPA.

However, during her studies at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio, the teaching bug bit Ratcliffe again when she volunteered to tutor her peers in math and accounting.

"I knew when I was tutoring that even though I was very interested in accounting and knew that a career as an accountant would bring me financial success, it was teaching that I really loved," she says. Determined not to wander from her career plan, however, she forged ahead on the accounting path. After graduation she took a job with Coopers and Lybrand, a big-six accounting firm in Arlington, Virginia.

Through a community outreach program at the firm, she volunteered to teach a class at a local high school. Through Junior Achievement, which aims to bring business role models into classrooms, Ratcliffe taught a class focused on personal and family finances.

"I eventually found myself anxiously awaiting Friday afternoons each week," Ratcliffe says. "Not because of the weekend, but because that was when I was in the classroom."

Before long, she left the accounting firm and enrolled at Ohio State University, where she earned a master's degree in business education. She also earned certification in comprehensive and vocational business education.

"All students and adults need the opportunity to acquire and maintain basic computer skills," says Ratcliffe, who is actively looking for a teaching position for the upcoming school year.

From Healing to Helping

Most Americans remember where they were and what they were doing on April 19, 1995, when the Edward R. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed. Imagine how it must have affected Oklahomans.

Belinda McCharen, recently named Oklahoma's school-to-work coordinator, remembers how she felt that day. In her typical style, she reacted by taking action.

The Saturday after the bombing McCharen and five school counselors met for a brainstorming session. The result was an invaluable resource for elementary school teachers and counselors. *The Terrible Scary Explosion*, a book written almost entirely by McCharen, is about crisis management.

"Many children in our schools were having trouble dealing with this tragedy and, quite frankly, this was to help us cope as well," she says.

The American School Counseling Association and Sylvan Learning Center funded the project and Kinko's printed the book for free. "With the cooperative effort of a lot of people, we were able to place a copy in the hands of every elementary teacher and counselor in the state by the end of April," McCharen says.

Before becoming school-to-work director, McCharen was guidance coordinator in the Oklahoma Department of Vocational and Technical Education for 10 years. During that time, she focused her energies on promoting one-on-one contact between students and school counselors. This led to a hiring surge of guidance counselors and students services administrators - from 50 to more than 185.

McCharen also sold the vocational department on implementing more career guidance programs at the elementary school level.

"As kids begin school, they learn words, then sentences, and will someday be able to put together a good composition. It is the same process with career counseling," McCharen says. "You cannot just expect a ninth-grader to enter high school knowing what career path he or she wants to follow. Such a decision requires prior awareness and exploration."

At the time, bringing career guidance to the lower grades did not top the vocational department's list of priorities and she had to convince Roy Peters, state director of vocational education, to buy in. Now that the programs are in place, however, McCharen isn't hearing any complaints.

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